

# THE DELIBERATIVE OPINION POLL: A DIALOGUE

**Editor's Note:** In a recently published book, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), James Fishkin, who holds the Darrell K. Royal Regents Chair in Government, Law, and Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, argues that the present process of presidential selection is badly flawed. In particular, the process has been emptied of deliberation. As a partial remedy, Fishkin advances the notion of a "deliberative opinion poll," in which a representative group of citizens would meet the candidates face-to-face and discuss the issues. In the January/February 1992 issue of *Public Perspective* (pp. 27-29), Michael Traugott, senior study director and professor of political science at the Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, examined Fishkin's argument.

General dissatisfaction with the current nominating process, together with the possibility that a "deliberative opinion poll" may actually be used in 1996, bring us back to the subject. Here, Fishkin responds to Traugott's critique. Then, Everett Ladd, Traugott, Fishkin, and Richard Morin (director of polling at the Washington Post) engage in a roundtable discussion of the proposed innovation.

## A RESPONSE TO TRAUGOTT

*By James Fishkin*

Michael Traugott raises a number of concrete issues about how my proposal of a deliberative opinion poll might be implemented. He does this in the context of a review of *Democracy and Deliberation*, a work of political theory that makes the general case for this kind of innovation. The book does not, however, offer detailed plans for the logistics of any particular event. Since Traugott has raised these issues, it seems to me that it would be useful for me to provide further details. Let me first situate the discussion with a brief summary of the idea. Then I will turn to each of Traugott's issues.

An ordinary poll models what the public thinks, whatever the level of thinking the public actually does. A major problem, in my view, with contemporary mass democracy, is that volatile, non-deliberative attitudes (and non-attitudes) are reported to us in a stream of findings that purport to establish everything from the public's approval of politicians to its view of competing health care proposals. In a "plebiscitary" democracy, these polls are read as giving guidance to public officials about what the people prefer. I am not proposing to dispense with public opinion polling as we know it. I am simply proposing an innovation which, I think, can serve as a useful supplement.

A "deliberative opinion poll" models what the public *would* think, if it had a

more adequate opportunity to think about the questions at issue. If, for example, a representative sample of the citizen voting age population were to meet in person for an extended period with the presidential candidates before the start of the primary season, and if they were to subject the candidates to extensive questioning, face to face, about their positions on various issues, then those citizens would have views that are, admittedly, unrepresentative of ordinary, uninformed public opinion. Their views would be unrepresentative because the citizens in this sample would have a far better basis for evaluating the candidates than would most of the rest of us. However, as a national random sample of the citizen voting age population, their informed views could be taken as representing, in a sense, what the public would think about the candidates, if the entire public could somehow be given a similar opportunity to examine the candidates face to face, and deliberate about their positions. Of course, such a latter supposition belongs to the realm of thought experiments in theory and philosophy. Yet my point is that we can see the moral force of imagining the conclusions that a fully informed and deliberative population would come to. We can see that it would amount to a superior form of democracy. For this reason, we can see the recommending force of the sample's deliberations, as representing the voice of

the people under conditions where the people have a voice that would be especially worth listening to, precisely because it would be more informed and more deliberative.

Traugott's concerns about this proposal seem to fall under the following categories: (a) disclosure of methods; (b) anonymity of the respondents; (c) uniqueness of the experiment; (d) my use of the word "poll"; and (e) distortions of the experiment from group interaction or social approval.

As to the first, there is no issue about disclosure of methods. In our planning for this event, we are, of course, prepared to disclose how the sample will be selected and what questions we will ask. In this respect, the effort is like any other poll. In our 1992 effort, we discussed the project with a number of reputable polling organizations and made concrete plans to use a sample to be provided by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago (NORC). Unfortunately, funding did not permit completion of the project for 1992, but we are making concrete plans for 1996 and we hope that NORC will be available once again.

Turning to (b), I agree, once again, that it would be imperative to keep the

names of the respondents from the press and from the candidates. Along these lines, we made plans to brief respondents on our expectations, and channel all communication with them through one central source. We planned, for example, to have the candidates provide us with briefing materials on their positions, which we would forward to the respondents before the events. The candidate organizations would never have been given direct access to the sample.

Turning to (c), it is true that the event is unique and that, therefore, we would lack the usual data for comparative purposes. To some degree, this problem arises with any innovation. My hope is that this kind of event will recur and that experience about it will accumulate. Such an event could be held at the state or local level as well as in other countries. There is even a group in Bulgaria—the Center for the Study of Democracy—which propose seriously to hold their own “National Caucus.”

In the meantime, the best response to this problem is to build into the project various forms of evaluation. We planned, for example, to study the deliberations of the sample by collecting several waves of data from the time of sample selection on through the months after the event. We have also given thought to the possibility of planting some of the same questions to be asked of our sample in national surveys conducted at the same time. Such data would help us deal with the question of whether the “deliberation” in a deliberative opinion poll makes any difference.

As for (d), my use of the word “poll,” I want to be explicit that I am attempting to invent a new concept, the deliberative opinion poll. I would be the first to emphasize that such a poll should not be mistaken for conventional survey research.

Despite the use of identical sampling methods, the whole point of the exercise is different. It is worth noting that the term “poll” is not the exclusive province of survey research. There is, for example, a long history of “straw polls” in American politics antedating the development of modern survey methods by about a century. In any case, so long as my usage of the term is explicit, confusion can be avoided.

Turning to (e), it is worth noting that people are known to offer socially approved responses in standard interviewer situations as well. In our case, we made plans to adopt an electronic process of voter tabulation that would provide for the equivalent of secret ballots. Hence, while a mass television audience would witness the aggregate results, the individual respondents would be guaranteed a degree of anonymity with respect to their responses that should serve to minimize the problem.

There is, however, a deeper issue about group interaction. Traugott seems to suggest that group interactions, by themselves, contaminate the results. “While the goal of deliberation is a laudable one, the process of group interaction will produce substantially different results than if the participants consider alternatives and are asked questions in private.”

In my view, deliberation is inherently interactive. The atomized citizen, isolated from opportunities for face to face discussions with candidates and other citizens, will come to different conclusions than would the respondents in my proposal. The very point of my proposals is to model the results of intensive, face to face deliberation rather than isolated self-scrutiny. A public opinion worthy of the name represents the considered views of a public, not a collection of isolated citizens. The small group deliberations we

intend will, at least temporarily, create such a public out of a sample which represents, in its diversity, the disparate elements of the entire population.

A great deal depends, of course, on the character of the small group deliberations. The National Issues Forums (NIF) of the Kettering Foundation are an important collaborator in this project. They bring ten years of experience with thousands of citizens forums on public issues. They will contribute carefully structured briefing materials on the key issues facing the country (as these can be determined prior to the event by published opinion polls and, budget permitting, focus groups). NIF will also contribute experienced moderators for the small group sessions. We envision dividing the 600 delegates to the convention into 20 small groups of 30 persons each. These groups will work through each of several main issue areas with the moderators. One task of the small group sessions would be the identification of key questions in each issue area to be addressed to the candidates in the large plenary sessions. After several days of deliberation and questioning of the candidates, the delegates would be asked to vote their views of the candidates in each issue area and their ratings of the candidates overall. These results would be broken out by party for Republicans, Democrats, and Independents.

These are the main elements of the scenario we developed for 1992, and our projected effort for 1996. The plan has been to host the event at the LBJ Library in Austin, Texas. WETA, the Washington PBS station, has indicated its interest in attempting to mount the effort needed to put the Caucus on PBS in 1996. This past year, the funding effort began late because of the Gulf War. We are all hopeful that if we begin early, the world’s first deliberative opinion poll will launch the next season of presidential selection.

# A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION WITH JAMES FISHKIN, MICHAEL TRAUGOTT, AND RICHARD MORIN

**Everett Ladd:** Jim Fishkin's book gets right in the middle of two very important arguments and sets of concerns: (1) What's wrong with our present system of presidential nominee selection, and how do we fix it?; and (2) What's the proper place of "polling" in American politics? Are there deficiencies in the predominant methods and use of polls which might be reduced if new methods and uses were introduced as supplements?

Jim, would you begin our discussion by summarizing for us what you see as the biggest potential gains from a "deliberative opinion poll" exercise in 1996?

**James Fishkin:** What I am proposing is to get a representative and deliberative process at the beginning of the presidential selection season, when it can make a difference. We would gain the advantage of using momentum for a constructive purpose. We would gain the advantage of passing on the full range of serious candidates before they dropped out from lack of funding or whatever, and of using television—which has reduced our discourse to shrinking sound bites—for a constructive purpose. I believe I can make the case, mostly on Madisonian and Hamiltonian grounds, that we should have deliberative democracy, rather than just the plebiscitary variety as we do now.

Let me expand a bit on the specifics of my proposal, beyond what I wrote in my initial response to Michael Traugott.

NORC would select our sample and secure participation of the delegates. In our plans for 1992, they were expecting a quite high response rate because of the incentive of people wanting to be on national television. We would fly the delegates to Austin, pay their expenses and, as well, pay them a per diem. NORC's Norman Bradburn suggested that we ought to develop a hardship fund, and we built one into our budget proposal. Such a fund would help us in securing the participation of poorer selectees.

Once assembled in Austin, the 600 delegates would be divided into small groups, which would meet during the day, working through each of the issues with moderators supplied by the National Issues Forums (NIF) of the Kettering Foundation. One of the tasks in the small group sessions would be identification of key questions the delegates wanted to raise with the candidates in the large evening broadcast sessions. The small group sessions themselves would be mostly off-camera and deliberative. There are questions on how to construct the small groups. We might want to do pilots to experiment a bit with how heterogeneous or homogeneous they ought to be. In any case, the groups would work through the issue areas. Candidates would have the option of coming to some of the small group meetings, but we think given their schedules, candidates' participation might be limited to the evening sessions, Friday and Saturday.

The delegates would arrive Thursday night, they'd be briefed, divided into small groups, they'd meet during the day in these small group sessions. PBS would, in the plan for 1992, give us between 6 and 8 hours of television time: 2-3 hours Friday, 2-3 hours Saturday, and 3 hours Sunday afternoon.

**Richard Morin:** How will you divide the small groups into the issues areas?

**Fishkin:** We intend to divide them into groups that will deal with *all* the issue areas over the course of the three-day caucus. We want the delegates to vote on all the issues at the end, so they need to spend some time on each. There has been some talk on reducing the number of issue areas from our original idea of 6 to 4.

**Morin:** But would a candidate have the opportunity to select a small group to appear before, or if he were especially interested in one issue, to attend a session when the group is discussing it?

**Fishkin:** That's the way we are envisioning it now.

**Morin:** I'm worried you may in fact be biasing things. If Jerry Brown, for example, had the time to work the crowd, there might be a possible effect, especially if the other candidates' scheduling didn't give them equal time.

**Fishkin:** That's an interesting issue that, when we get closer to the event, needs more concrete examination. Exactly what should the ground rules be? We never got to that point in the planning for 1992.

**Michael Traugott:** Were you thinking, Jim, about trying to secure guarantees from candidates about appearing?

**Fishkin:** Yes. We had serious discussions with a lot of the candidates. In fact, Paul Tsongas came to Austin and announced that he would come to our caucus, and that he would challenge all other candidates to participate fully because this was a great innovation in democracy. Then he went on CNN, on the Evans & Novak program, and said the same thing.

**Morin:** What about authorities—experts in health care or whatever issue? Would they participate in the smaller group discussion?

**Fishkin:** We hadn't planned on that. We have thought that if the ordinary citizens had the Kettering briefing materials and the statements of candidates' positions, that would be enough.

**Morin:** Take an issue like Brown's flat tax proposal. Do you think that most citizens would have enough information to discuss it intelligently? Who is going to raise penetrating criticism if no economists are present in the small group sessions?

**Fishkin:** It might be a good idea to build "expert testimony" concretely into the scenario. Up until now we have been

planning to rely heavily on the National Issues Forum background materials, the work of the moderators in the small group meetings and, of course, on the competitive interplay among the candidates. We do have time to carefully consider building in an opportunity for experts—a range of experts—to provide position papers or even informed reaction in person. But we must be careful, because we don't want to open the discussions to a full range of interest groups to lobby the delegates. Our goal is real delegate deliberation.

**Traugott:** You argue, Jim, that your proposal involves not only an alternative to the way things are being done now, but a better way. It's not clear to me that it's better, although I'm quite willing to grant that it's different.

One issue which I found ambiguous in your book, and which I still haven't gotten sorted out, is whether your proposed National Caucus is one meeting or two. I don't understand to what extent you're going to keep Democrats and Republicans separate, or when it is that you're going to bring them together. You've raised now the possibility, for example, of a debate?

**Fishkin:** No, it would be Democrats only and Republicans only for debates. Obviously we wouldn't have Democrats debating Republicans at that stage. In my original proposal in *The Atlantic* and in my book, I discuss this as one overall convention which would break up into two halves. One half would be self-selected Democrats, the other self-selected Republicans, with independents beforehand having the opportunity to choose which partisan side they attend. Democratic candidates would appear before the Democrats in the plenary sessions, Republican candidates before the rank-and-file Republicans.

**Traugott:** So, you really envision two separate, parallel events?

**Fishkin:** My original proposal was to break it up into two "half conventions." The reason you are justifiably confused about it, Mike, is because as concrete

planning went ahead at PBS, there were people there who wanted it to take on more of the flavor of a single national issues convention. So, as we got closer to actually doing the caucus in 1992, we did move closer to seeing it as a single event. When McNeil-Lehrer signed on to do the broadcast part, that was one of their conditions—their principal alteration of my original conception. And, provided that they would break out the results—candidate and issue preferences—on party lines, I went along with them.

**Morin:** I was intrigued with the notion of "soundbite democracy," because in some ways, Jim, your proposal is going to encourage it. You're envisioning 8-9 hours of televised sessions over one weekend. Those who watch short TV clips of the results will far outnumber those who actually watch the sessions. Which puts the traditional 800 pound monkey back on the media to do right by the results—though we are hardpressed to do it right. Inevitably, what we will extract from the process are the soundbites.

**Fishkin:** Given the First Amendment, we can't control that.

**Morin:** God Bless the First Amendment. But that leads to a second question: Are you not in fact creating the ultimate horserace poll across a range of issues and candidates? Even if I am assigned to view all nine hours of the Caucus broadcast as a Post reporter, won't I basically focus on the horserace? Forget the complexities of health care and the economy and dwell on who "won?"

**Fishkin:** That's been a subject of debate. Some of the people who have been advising us like Newton Minnow, for example, express real ambivalence on whether we should take the poll at the end on the candidates. Others say that if we don't, the media will certainly crown the winner anyway. I'm not as concerned about it as some because I think a horserace that is representative and deliberative is very different from the kind of superficial competition of "impression management" that we have now. I think the deliberative opinion poll would be a better horserace.

**Morin:** That leads me to another question: How much information will viewers have on the process whereby the horserace issues were decided or the determined. That goes to an observation about the nature of your small discussion groups and the media coverage of them. I am interested in how you can better capture the confrontational aspects that rise out of the small groups' dynamic. Simply having citizens ask Brown or Clinton things like—"I don't get it, I don't understand it. Is that going to hurt me?"—then listening to the waffling or the explanation, would be immensely valuable. But I don't see how that will be captured and presented to the public. Rather, what you will put on air is nervous citizens standing up asking, sort of like the Norman Rockwell paintings, questions on which the candidates are likely primed.

**Fishkin:** We have thought a lot about having the candidates respond not just singly, but interacting one with another in response to the questions. Perhaps we need to provide for their challenging the responses of other candidates.

**Ladd:** Would you address further the role of TV in the present system of candidate selection, and what that role would be if your proposal were implemented. First, isn't TV's role now just too large? And isn't TV's role profoundly nondeliberative? Candidates going from airport to airport for little television sessions, ever conscious that what will make it to the electorate is a "bite" that gets smaller each year. Now, into that you suggest introducing a process whereby just before the New Hampshire primary a television network presents a "deliberative opinion poll" and says two-thirds of its "representative sample" of Democrats prefer William Gladstone to his five announced opponents. And what's more, the network says its sample show strong agreement with many of Gladstone's stands.

Jim and Robin assure us these findings are vastly more substantial, more real, than what all the conventional polls being conducted are showing. This deliberative opinion poll, the TV people tell us, is very "real," because it "models what the

[entire] public *would* think if it had a more adequate opportunity to think” about the candidates and the issues. You said in your response to Michael Traugott’s original review: “Yet my point is that we can see the moral force of imagining the conclusions that a fully informed and deliberative population would come to. We can see what would amount to a superior form of democracy” [this issue, p.29]. So, TV comes on and says, “Here is what people really would think.” This is superior. Gladstone gets Big Mo, his New Hampshire vote surges, and he becomes the 42nd President of the US. Isn’t this a problem?

**Fishkin:** First, I do intend it as something that might in a more deliberative and rational way launch presidential candidacies. Still, I don’t think you should overestimate the impact that the recommending force, the moral force this thing would have. A candidate, if he is otherwise not viable, will not be helped much by a strong showing in the caucus. But it might get a hearing for candidates who are interesting but at the outset lack national recognition or financial resources. I think my proposal would have enough impact to introduce these candidacies and the issues to the American public in an engaging way, and in a more informed and deliberative way.

**Ladd:** By the way, I hope it’s clear that my concern isn’t for the 600 people who are party to this caucus. They are probably going to become better citizens as a result. I’m thinking about the millions of others who know nothing about the caucus, except that they are told that a superior form of democracy has anointed William Gladstone.

**Fishkin:** When I first proposed this, I proposed it hypothetically as a real institutional innovation. It was only when I told Max Kampleman about what was my crazy theoretical proposal, that he said it’s a practical proposal which could be done as a television demonstration and have a real impact. And legislation wasn’t needed. Kampleman is the one who put me in touch with WETA and PBS. I don’t think that the American people are going

to defer unthinkingly to what they see in the caucus. I think rather they are going to have their attention drawn to candidates and issues that are taken seriously in the Caucus, and that impact is all to the good.

**Traugott:** Let me say again, as I did in my original review, that what you are proposing is the ultimate “mediality.” It has certain living and breathing components through television. There’s a potential for reporting it in the context of a certain kind of moral suasion that’s got to do with its “superior” form.

**Fishkin:** But I view this as a model of democracy that should be taken seriously. After all, the direct primary itself was spread by the Progressives and then spread again at the presidential level following The McGovern-Fraser Commission. It’s a relatively recent invention. And I’m very concerned about the entire move towards plebiscitary, populist democracy, teledemocracy, “CBS on the Line,” etc. I think that there’s a serious conceptual problem in thinking that the only form of democracy that appeals to the American public is something more direct and majoritarian. I hold a different model of democracy—and I’m proposing a demonstration of it. It’s a model of democracy that deserves consideration as a supplement to atomistic mass direct democracy, which is subject to all of the criticisms that we know so well. We’ll never bring back the smoke filled rooms. I’m trying to get political equality and deliberation at the same time.

**Ladd:** You don’t think we get mass deliberation over the course of six or eight months of an election season?

**Fishkin:** Well, I make the case in my book that we don’t get much. As for candidate selection, look how irrational the process has been this year. We’re going to get two wounded candidates. So, I don’t think today’s process is very deliberative or representative. And the arbitrary interactions of the timing of the primaries, low voter turnout, the negative ads, and the low levels of information, is all very destructive. I don’t have the chutzpah to say we can end all this. All

I’m saying is before it starts let’s have a deliberative and representative prelude, and see if it gets into the public’s consciousness.

**Traugott:** I agree, Jim, with almost everything you just said. But, would it make a lot of difference to you if the caucus were held in the November preceding the election—instead of just before the first primaries? Much of my concern about your national caucus’s becoming a mediality comes from pushing it right up in front of the event. And not giving the candidates a chance to respond to the coverage that comes from the next two or three production cycles.

**Fishkin:** I originally proposed it for November, in fact. And then it got moved closer to the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. PBS moved it to January.

**Ladd:** You’ve indicated a number of times now that what you originally envisioned has gotten pushed in a different direction as television has wanted to make your proposal its own creature.

**Fishkin:** But the changes have all come about from the informed participation of some very impressive people: for example, Ed Fouhy, who is the producer of the presidential debates; and Dick Richter, a producer at WETA. We also talked with the MacNeil-Lehrer people. While there have been some adjustments, there’s nothing I’ve been asked by anybody that compromises any of the principled issues.

**Ladd:** But isn’t it a central fact that a process of presidential nominee selection that the parties long controlled has been taken over by outside forces, especially those centering around television?

**Fishkin:** Absolutely. I couldn’t agree with you more. That’s been the unintended consequence of the “reforms” in the development of the primary system. The national conventions are nondeliberative events, because the delegates are pledged. And so the unintended consequence of the reform is that there’s almost no opportunity for the

people to think about the power that they've been asked to exercise. But returning to the smoke filled rooms, as Walter Mondale advocated a little while ago, just isn't going to happen. It would be perceived as undemocratic. My attempt is to try to come up with an idea of democracy that will get us out of the dilemma. Because either we have politically equal but relatively incompetent masses, or politically unequal but relatively more competent elites. I have no doubt that the elites are more competent. But if they get too much influence on the process, particularly in this environment, it will be perceived as undemocratic.

**Ladd:** I have one final question, picking up on a point that Mike made in the review he originally wrote for us. Would the deliberative opinion poll in fact be likely to model what the public would think if it had more adequate opportunity to think about candidates and issues? First of all, you've got the matter of small group dynamics—involving here the happenstance introduction of certain strong personalities in a particular caucus. Then, what if Candidate X just happens to have a bad day when he's at the caucus? If you held twelve of your proposed sessions back to back, each would be a unique event. Each would be different. But the one caucus you propose will be portrayed as revealing what Americans in general would

think. Isn't that misleading information? Isn't it more honest and accurate to say this is what one small group of Americans, subject to a particular set of internal dynamics that may have been quite happenstance, affected by the assembled personalities, happened to think?

**Fishkin:** I wouldn't put it that way at all. I think the caucus has a recommending force because if we can succeed in establishing a deliberative atmosphere, and if we can succeed in getting good input from the candidates and input on the issues, it's not misleading to say this is what the general public would think. If our delegates represent the public in all of its diversity, if we can get them really engaged thinking about the issues, then I'm not going to grant that just because the caucus can't actually be held over and over, because of the expense, and because of the uniqueness of the moment at the beginning of the primary season, that hypothetically it doesn't have some force. I think that the caucus will have some normative input because its delegates will be more informed than ordinary citizens. They will be better prepared and they will have the experience of examining the candidates up close for a period of time. They will have a more informed opportunity to debate the alternatives. The result won't be perfect, and as we experiment we can make it better, but it will be more

deliberative and representative than the circus we have now.

**Ladd:** We have, let's say, 200 Democrats at your caucus. Among them are two very strong willed and articulate Tsongas supporters. They present Tsongas and his ideas brilliantly in all the sessions. There's no one comparably articulate and insistent on Clinton's or Brown's side. And to boot when the candidates come, Tsongas happens to have a really good day, while Clinton is a bit ill and does a poor job. Can't this occur, more or less by chance?

**Fishkin:** Well, there are all kinds of contingencies just as there are contingencies also in any conventional poll. It's true, of course, that conventional polls can be taken over and over, one of Mike Traugott's most interesting points. Yes, the delegates might be exposed to more articulate supporters of one candidate or another, but in actual life, if we had a more deliberative society, everyone would be exposed to more articulate persons who might sway them. I would also claim that the Caucus would be more representative of the entire country and more deliberative as a substantive process than any of the current primaries or caucuses. In that sense it should have a recommending force because it better expresses the voice of the people under conditions where the people can think about what they would say.

